

Social Work Task Force

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**To: Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families
Alan Johnson, Secretary of State for Health**

Dear Secretaries of State,

FIRST REPORT OF THE SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE

Social workers do some of the most valuable yet challenging jobs in our society. They support people at times in their lives when – perhaps because of bereavement, addiction, mental illness, disability, old age or because children are at risk of neglect or abuse – they are at their most vulnerable, and can be most difficult to help.

In order to do their jobs well, social workers need support from the public, service users, Government, their employers, and those who train and educate, regulate and inspect them. At the same time, they must demonstrate and hold themselves accountable for practice which really makes a difference for the people who are letting them into their lives. The Social Work Task Force does not believe social workers are currently getting the support they need to maintain the consistent high professional standards the public rightly expects – but the profession must also take more responsibility for those standards itself.

The Social Work Task Force welcomes, therefore, the commitments that the Secretaries of State for Children, Schools and Families and for Health have made to improvement in the support received by social workers, and the recommendations of Lord Laming in his report “The Protection of Children in England”. We have been asked to advise the Government on the content of a comprehensive programme of reform for the whole social work profession, across adult and children’s services. This letter sets out our emerging view of the challenges we will need to address and opens our Call for Evidence. It includes our early response to Lord Laming’s report, and our recommendations for the future of the DCSF’s Integrated Children’s System. Finally, it describes how we will work over the next few months, including actions we will take to ensure that we are hearing the views of front line practitioners, service users and members of the public as our recommendations develop.

We are due to make our full recommendations in October. However, it is already clear to us that reform for the social work profession must be driven by a range of stakeholders as well as the Government. Employers, Local Government, educational institutions, inspectorates and regulators, other professions, members of the public, service users and carers, and social workers themselves all have important roles to play. We need to work together to understand and find solutions to the real capacity challenges the profession is facing and to develop a renewed and ambitious understanding of the role and purpose of social work now and for the future. The changes we need will take time to get right and to embed and will need long term commitment from all concerned.

The messages we are hearing

Good social work benefits everyone in society. Any one of us could need the support of a social worker at some point in our lives. At the heart of good social work is high quality professional practice. The Task Force believes that, for social workers to make a difference for the people they are working with, every engagement with that person and their family, and every activity to support them, must be of the highest possible quality. Every face to face interaction must have value, and so must record keeping, assessments, plans, court and tribunal reports and multi-agency case meetings and other professional products. To operate at this level, social workers must receive a high standard of supervision and education which supports them in reflective practice and in making complex judgements. These high standards need to be promoted and enabled by the profession and by the system in which it works.

To inform its full advice to Government, the Task Force will need to set out what high quality practice means, and to be clear about any changes that are needed to the wider system to support social workers in delivering it. We have begun our work by inviting social workers, service users, employers and managers and other professionals to talk to us about their experience of social work and the challenges facing it. More than 1000 people, from across the spectrum of adult and children and families' services, including service users and other professionals, have taken the opportunity to get involved so far.

We have heard about a great deal of positive work which social workers are doing around the country and we know that there is excellent practice, innovative work and strong management in action in many places. We have heard from many social workers who would like to help in moving their profession onto a new footing and who want to be part of renewal which builds on the best of what is currently in place. However, many have told us that they working under severe pressure, and that this threatens their ability to ensure that their work is consistently of high quality.

We have more people to listen to, and much more evidence to collect and analyse. This letter gives us the opportunity to play back some of the messages we are hearing. These fall into a number of themes which are described below.

Theme one: We have been told that social workers feel they do not have enough time to devote directly to the people they want to help. They feel overstretched by staff shortages and tied up in bureaucracy. Pressures due to high caseloads and high vacancy rates contribute to this. It can also be about poor management or inflexible use of resources. Some people have said that the thresholds for cases are so high that they are not able to use their skills to work with service users in more preventative ways – even though this should reduce the need for crisis interventions overall. Others feel that they spend time on administrative tasks which are not good use of their skills and take time away from high quality casework. We have also heard that performance management regimes cause social workers to prioritise quantity and processes over quality in some cases. Underpinning this, many social workers have told us that they feel that the purpose of social work is poorly understood by employers, other professionals, the public and to some extent, by social workers themselves.

- The Task Force is working to understand more clearly how social work time is used and why. We are conducting a workload survey of 1000 social workers which will help us to do that, and will also be looking – as Lord Laming has recommended – at how caseload management guidelines could help. However, we want to go further than this to ensure that there is a very clear understanding of how social workers' time and skills should be used to have the most value for service users, and that there is the capacity within the system to support this.

Theme two: We have been told that social workers feel very frustrated by some of the tools and support they are given to do their jobs. Many social workers have talked to us about poor IT support in children and adults' services. Some have very poor quality hardware. We have heard concerns in many areas that compliance with the Integrated Children's System makes record keeping a burdensome process and drives a model of practice which can be at odds with professional judgement.

We have heard that many social workers do not think they receive the amount and quality of supervision they need to help them to do their jobs confidently and safely, or that they are not well and supportively managed. Some complain that they do not feel valued and invested in by their employers or that 'work life balance' is hard to achieve. Some social workers have described work environments in which it is difficult to work on confidential issues or which are not welcoming to service users and which they feel that other professionals would not accept.

- The Task Force believe it is essential that social workers and their employers make the best use of the resources available to ensure that practice is well supported. We have prioritised our investigations into the Integrated Children's System at the Government's request and our recommendations about this are set out later in this letter. We are particularly concerned that all social workers should receive an appropriate level of high quality management and clinical supervision. This is critical to supporting their professional judgement and promoting reflective practice. We have welcomed Lord Laming's recommendations in this regard and want to go further to

ensure that good supervision is supported by every part of the system. We will continue to listen to views and consider evidence about how social workers can best be supported to inform our recommendations.

Theme three: We have been told that new social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job and that the education system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation. Many people have told us that new entrants to social work can lack the mixture of practical, analytical and report-writing skills they need to become effective professionals. We have heard complaints about the extent to which initial training courses prepare social workers for the work place. We have also heard concerns that the selection of students is not rigorous in ensuring that they have both the intellectual and interpersonal skills they will need. There are particular concerns about the availability and quality of statutory practice placements during initial training, and also about the expectations placed on social workers in their first years of employment. Some people have also told us about newly qualified social workers who are working in situations so difficult that no initial training programme could prepare them to be effective.

Social workers need training and education throughout their careers, but we have heard concerns about the extent to which employers support this. There are also complaints about the quality and relevance of post qualification training, particularly in supporting social workers to develop specialist skills and expertise. We have also heard from social workers who would like to have much more access to research and academic learning throughout their careers, so that they can transfer the latest learning into their own practice and share learning from practice with the wider social work community.

- The Task Force is clear that these are challenges which employers and the education system must jointly understand and respond to and will be working with the major stakeholders concerned to develop a shared understanding and clear recommendations for change over the coming months. This needs to include ensuring that social workers are supported to develop throughout their careers and are able to specialise appropriately. We welcome the interest of the Children and Families Select Committee which is conducting an inquiry into some of these issues at present and look forward to their recommendations.

Theme four: We have been told that social workers do not feel that their profession speaks with a strong national voice or is well supported at national level. Social workers do not feel they are giving a clear and confident account of the purpose of social work and are failing to influence public policy, the media and national debate. Many people have expressed frustration to us that there was no strong professional voice explaining the social workers' perspective to the media or the public at the time of the media interest in "Baby P". Many social workers have also expressed frustration at an absence of strong leadership within the profession: the profession is not felt to be setting standards for itself and is, therefore, vulnerable to being 'done to' by Government and others seeking reform. Some social workers look to Government-funded regulatory or delivery bodies for this leadership, but do not necessarily find it there. Many have expressed confusion about unclear roles or overlapping remits of those organisations or find it hard to understand the work that they do.

- The Task Force is very interested in how the social work profession can develop stronger national leadership – including what we can learn from other professions. It hopes that its work will stimulate the profession to find its own strong voice and to be able to make recommendations to Government which will support this. We also want to make recommendations to Government which will ensure that the national organisations it funds use their resources well, to support high quality practice on the ground and provide good value for money.

Theme five: We have been told that systems for managing the performance of social workers are not driving quality first and foremost. We have heard concerns that inspection and performance management arrangements for social work education and for social work services do not do enough to measure the quality of provision. We have also heard from social workers and educators who feel that their performance is measured in mechanistic ways which privilege quantitative rather than qualitative outcomes. This makes it hard for professionals to prioritise high quality practice or to be guided by the needs of service users when they allocate their time and resources. We have also heard that social workers do not always feel that their employers are held to account for giving them the support that the need, and that employers are not consistent in involving the regulator when there are concerns about the quality of practice.

- The Task Force believes that it is critical that there are checks on the system to ensure social workers, and the services they work in, are achieving good outcomes for service users and making good use of public resources. Quality must be consistent between services and around the country. But performance management must be focused on supporting practice which improves outcomes for service users. We have also heard arguments that the inspection and performance management regime should have support for improvement and development as well as monitoring of quality at its core. These are critical issues that our recommendations will need to address.

Theme six: We have been told that social workers feel that their profession is under-valued, poorly understood and under continuous media attack. This is making it hard for them to do their jobs and hard to attract people into the profession. Many social workers who have spoken to us have said that they feel vilified by the media and that, as a result, their work is not supported or valued by the public. They find this demoralising – it contributes to high turnover rates in the profession and recruitment difficulties and makes it difficult for social workers to do their jobs well. They also say that public distrust of social workers creates barriers to engagement for people who may need social work support. At the same time, social workers have also said to us that they do not feel that the profession is good at articulating the role and purpose of social work: existing definitions of social work are not felt to reflect the reality of the role and its purpose and are difficult for members of the public, other professionals and even social workers themselves to relate to and engage with.

- The Task Force believe that a refreshed and easy to understand description of the purpose of social work is critical to improving public understanding and is also necessary to ensure that all elements of the Government's programme of reform are supportive of each other – for example to help employers and educators to work together with the same understanding of what social work training needs to achieve. We are taking forward urgent work to develop and propose such a description and will consult the profession, other professionals and members of the public about it over the summer to inform our autumn recommendations. At the same time, we feel it is critical that we engage directly with the media to begin to break through the negative cycle of poor media representation and negative public perceptions. We will continue to seek opportunities to enter and challenge public and media debate over the coming months.

Alongside this letter, we are publishing our Call for Evidence which will give organisations, individual social workers, other professionals and members of the public the chance to respond to these early impressions and to provide evidence which will help the Task Force to recommend solutions. We particularly want to hear from those on the front line and their managers about the innovative and effective approaches they are taking to delivering high quality services and overcoming capacity issues. Details of the Call for evidence are set out at Annex A.

Responding to Lord Laming's recommendations

When Lord Laming made his report "Protection of Children in England, a progress report" in March, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families asked the Task Force to advise him about how the recommendations relating to Social Work should be taken forward, and, particularly to accelerate our investigations into the Integrated Children's System (ICS).

The Social Work Task Force recognises and agrees with the problems Lord Laming has identified in children and families' services. The actions that he recommends will help to tackle some of the serious problems facing social work in those settings. In particular, we welcome his recommendation that there should be a national supply strategy for social work, his focus on supervision and manageable case loads and the emphasis he gives training and education for social workers so that they can develop the specialist skills they need to fulfil their roles, both through initial and post graduate training. We also welcome Ministers' commitment to take account of the impact of Lord Laming's recommendations on adults' as well as children and families' social work.

The challenges that the Task Force is identifying are complex and interrelated – and impact on the whole of the social work profession, including those who work in adults' services. We therefore believe that implementation of Lord Laming's recommendations will need to form part of a comprehensive programme of reform which must be broader. It must benefit adults' as well as children and families' social work, and it must be founded on a clear understanding of the social work profession we need for the future, as well as the challenges facing social workers today.

Our immediate advice on the implementation of each of Lord Laming's recommendations about social work is set out at Annex B. We will take full account of all of Lord Laming's recommendations in developing our full advice to Ministers about the shape of a comprehensive reform programme for the profession.

Integrated Children's System (ICS)

In our work on the ICS we have sought to engage closely with the people most affected: those who are using the system and those who design it. A sub-group of the Task Force including a number of additional front line practitioners, has met with front-line workers and with the suppliers, taken documentary evidence from Local Authorities, conducted an on-line survey of over 500 users and made ICS a specific topic at each of the Task Force's regional events. We needed to build a true picture of the effect of the system and the different ways it has been implemented in different areas. It is critical that our recommendations to Government about changes build on those aspects of the system which have value, and do not create more disruption or bureaucracy.

Our conclusion is that ICS should be reformed so that it supports effective record-keeping and case management by social workers but should not seek to mandate a particular approach to front-line social work practice. There are a number of changes which we believe the Government can make quickly to make local systems easier to use. In the long-term we consider that Local Authorities need to take stronger ownership of local systems on the basis of simplified national requirements. Whilst we have focused on ICS we are also hearing concern from social workers working with adults that they have similar problems with IT systems. It is important that any changes in ICS inform development and improvement in adult services systems also. Our full recommendations are set out in Annex C.

Immediate next steps

As the Social Work Task Force continues to develop its recommendations to Government, we want to hear from as many people as possible not only about what the problems are but also about the possible solutions. The Call for Evidence which is published alongside this letter will enable individuals, organisations and members of the public to submit their views, and evidence about ways of delivering social work which are really making a difference.

We also want to begin the process of establishing a new understanding of the social work that society needs now and in the future. We will publish our recommendations about this when we make our interim report in July and will consult with the public and the profession about it.

We are also continuing to gather evidence which will give us a stronger understanding of the causes of current problems, including conducting a large scale survey of social worker work loads so that we can gain a full understanding of how they currently use their time and what influences this.

The success of our regional events has demonstrated the importance of enabling front line social workers and their managers to express their views, propose solutions and contribute to our work. So that we can increase the reach and impact of the Task Force and start to work towards solutions, we are:

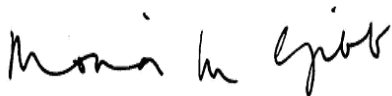
- extending the membership of the Task Force itself to increase the input from people with fresh, direct experience of delivering services on the ground
- with the help of *Community Care* magazine, setting up a new reference group for practising social workers to contribute to our work.
- developing new channels for service users, including those whose voices may be seldom heard, to speak directly to the Task Force.
- continuing to use our Key Partners Group to engage with and challenge employers, professional bodies and Government delivery organisations and others with a strong interest in the quality and future of social work to play a major part in this reform programme. In particular, we will be working to bring together social work educators and employers so that we can begin to

establish a shared understanding of, and solutions to, the demands and challenges to which the social work education system needs to be able to respond.

The Task Force will publish its next report, which will focus on practice, and our response to the Call for Evidence in July. We will make our full recommendations to Government in October.

We very much welcome the support our work has received from the Government over the past few months, and the work that Ministers and Secretaries of State have been doing to raise the profile of, and to secure investment in, the profession. We look forward to continuing to work closely with the Government as we develop our proposals for long term reform.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Moira Gibb'.

Moira Gibb, CBE

Chair, Social Work Task Force

Annex A

SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE CALL FOR EVIDENCE

A crucial part of the work of the Task Force has been to ensure that front line social workers, their managers and service users are able to be full and active partners. Therefore the Task Force has been gathering, and continues to gather evidence from a variety of sources. We have been holding regional events across the country. We have visited local authorities where we have talked to practising social workers, people who use services, managers and directors, staff from Higher Education Institutes and other professionals who work with social workers. We are undertaking a workload survey and have asked 30 local authorities and seven other organisations to help us with this. We have also established on-line surveys.

Some key messages are already emerging from these sources. These are set out in the letter from the Chair of the Social Work Task Force to the Secretaries of State for Health and for Children, Schools and Families.

The Task Force is now launching a Call for Evidence in order to formally collate information and literature relevant to these key messages and to identify other themes that may not have emerged as forcefully before now. The Call for Evidence will enable the Task Force to

- a) further understand the key issues and correct any inaccurate perceptions
- b) identify possible solutions to the challenges facing the profession by documenting examples of innovative systems and activities which work well in delivering social work.

We particularly want to hear from those involved in the day to day delivery of social work services for both children and families and adults about innovative and effective approaches they are taking to develop high quality services and overcoming capacity issues.

There will be 2 processes for evidence gathering

- Completing an on-line survey
- Formal submissions of substantial evidence in the form of published research, “grey literature” (i.e. completed or near complete but as yet unpublished) and newly written evidence

The closing date for submission of evidence is Monday 1st June.

Please go to www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf to complete the questionnaire and submit evidence electronically.

ANNEX B

SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE ADVICE ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN LORD LAMING'S REPORT, "THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN ENGLAND"

The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families wrote to the Social Work Task Force on 12 March 2009 about the publication of Lord Laming's report "The Protection of Children in England". He asked that our work should take account of Lord Laming's recommendations and asked for detailed proposals for how his recommendations should be implemented.

The Task Force welcomes Lord Laming's recommendations. We believe that the comprehensive reform programme for social work, to which Ministers have committed, will need to address the issues Lord Laming has identified, but go further and be broader in its ambitions – particularly to benefit social workers who work with adults as well as those in children's services. Our detailed advice on Lord Laming's recommendations in relation to Social Work is set out below.

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
15	The Social Work Taskforce should establish guidelines on guaranteed supervision time for social workers that may vary depending on experience.	<p>We agree that with Lord Laming that adequate and high quality supervision is critical to enabling effective social work practice – for social workers in adult services as well as those working with children and families.</p> <p>Employers and managers, as well as government guidance, have important roles in making sure that this happens. An approach which secures this will be an important part of the comprehensive reform programme which the Task Force intends to recommend to Government.</p>
16	The Department for Children, Schools and Families should revise <i>Working Together to Safeguard Children</i> to set out the elements of high quality supervision focused on case planning, constructive challenge and professional development.	<p>High quality supervision must be available to all social workers and is a critical resource in supporting them in the professional judgements that they must make as a part of their practice.</p> <p>As part of the Task Force's advice on improvements to practice, we intend to look not only at guidance but also at the training and development, standards, and possible work force roles which may be needed to ensure that every social worker benefits from high quality supervision.</p>

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
24	Develop the basis for a national children's social worker supply strategy that will address recruitment and retention difficulties, to be implemented by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This should have a particular emphasis on child protection social workers.	<p>The Task Force strongly agrees that there needs to be a supply strategy for social work – include those working with adults as well as in children and families roles.</p> <p>This will take time to develop and require strong leadership from central Government. It will need to be supported by a clear understanding of the demand for social work – and local factors which impact on this - and will need to inform measures including recruitment, initial training, and succession planning.</p>
	Work with the Children's Workforce Development Council and other partners to implement on a national basis, clear progression routes for children's social workers.	<p>The Task Force agrees that the social work profession needs much clearer progression routes, and that these should be linked to training and development opportunities. Employers have an important role in securing these and the Task Force will work closely with CWDC and Skills for Care in making recommendations in this area.</p>
	Develop national guidelines setting out maximum case-loads of children in need and child protection cases, supported by a weighting mechanism to reflect the complexity of cases, that will help plan the workloads of children's social workers.	<p>Ensuring that social workers (including those working outside child protection and with adults) have manageable case loads – and that case load management does not itself create additional bureaucracy and distract from practice is a critical issue for the profession.</p> <p>The Task Force will make its recommendations about this in the light of its work it is taking forward to understand the workloads social workers currently have and the impact of this on practice in different parts of the profession.</p>

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
	Develop a strategy for remodelling children's social work which delivers shared ownership of cases, administrative support and multidisciplinary support to be delivered nationally.	<p>Remodelling in teaching appears to have had significant benefits for the profession and the quality of support it provides to children and young people – in particular by clarifying the distinctive contribution of the teacher and by bringing people with other roles and skills into the classroom.</p> <p>The Task Force is keen to ensure that its recommendations secure similar clarity of purpose for social work, and to explore the role of administrative, para-professional and other roles in working alongside social workers to provide the service that users need. Such changes would need to be supported by a strong and effective remodelling or change management strategy.</p>
26	Work with higher education institutions and employers to raise the quality and consistency of social work degrees and strengthen their curriculums to provide high quality practical skills in children's social work.	<p>The Task Force intends to work closely with higher education institutions, employers and the GSCC to set out plans to ensure that the quality of initial training is improved, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that students gain the practical as well as theoretical skills and knowledge they need to perform effectively in the workplace.</p> <p>These reforms need to be part of a whole system approach to supporting social work education and continuing professional development – including through post graduate qualifications – so that social workers are able to develop and reflect on their specialist skills and practice throughout their careers.</p>

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
	<p>Work with higher education institutions to reform the current degree programme towards a system which allows for specialism in children's social work, including statutory children's social work placements, after the first year.</p>	<p>The Task Force agrees with Lord Laming that it is critical that trainee social workers gain experience and knowledge to work in specialist areas, including children and families work. It is important, however, that early specialisation does not prevent social workers from gaining the full range of skills they need to work with adults, children and families.</p> <p>The Government's commitment to funding the NQSW year and postgraduate qualifications for social workers mean that there is scope for specialisation to happen later than in the second year of the initial social work degree. The Task Force intends to consider, carefully, the case for specialisation at different stages, to inform its recommendations about the shape of a reformed approach to social work education.</p>
	<p>Put in place a comprehensive inspection regime to raise the quality and consistency of social work degrees across higher education institutions.</p>	<p>The Task Force agrees that this is crucial and that an effective inspection regime, which supports improvement as well as regulation, should be a critical aspect of the reformed approach to social work education.</p>
27	<p>The Department for Children, Schools and Families and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills should introduce a fully-funded, practice-focused children's social work postgraduate qualification for experienced children's social workers, with an expectation they will complete the programme as soon as is practicable.</p>	<p>Task Force welcomes Lord Laming's recommendation that children and families social work should become a postgraduate level profession. We also welcome Ministers' commitment to developing and funding a masters level qualification.</p> <p>This should form a key part of the reformed approach to social work education. It will be important that it is available to those working with adults as well as those working with children and families.</p>

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
28	<p>The Department for Children, Schools and Families, working with the Children's Workforce Development Council, General Social Care Council and partners should introduce a conversion qualification and English language test for internationally qualified children's social workers that ensures understanding of legislation, guidance and practice in England. Consideration should be given to the appropriate length of a compulsory induction period in a practice setting prior to formal registration as a social worker in England.</p>	<p>The Task Force strongly agrees that social workers who have qualified in other countries need to be well supported in entering the profession in England.</p> <p>It will consider carefully the evidence and legal basis for a conversion qualification to form part of this support and is also concerned to ensure that all social workers, including those who have qualified in this country, have high level skills in communication and written English to support their practice.</p>
31	<p>The General Social Care Council should review the Code of Practice for Social Workers and the employers' code ensuring the needs of children are paramount in both and that the employers' code provides for clear lines of accountability, quality supervision and support, and time for reflective practice. The employers' code should then be made statutory for all employers of social workers.</p>	<p>The Task Force agrees that it is critical that employers are held to account for the support they put in place for their workforce and are clear about when and how they should report cases of possible misconduct to the GSCC. Legislation will play an important part in this.</p> <p>The GSCC code for employees relates to all social care workers, not just to social workers. The Task Force feels strongly that the GSCC should consider developing a code of practice which is specific in addressing social work and that it should be proactive in ensuring that social workers and their employers understand and are familiar with the code and what it means.</p>

The Task Force's advice in response to Lord Laming's recommendations about the Integrated Children's System (recommendations 17 and 18) is set out in Annex C.

Annex C

SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE ADVICE ON THE INTEGRATED CHILDREN'S SYSTEM

Social Work Task Force - ICS review April 2009

Background

In March 2009, the Social Work Task Force were asked to review the Integrated Children's System (ICS) and make recommendations for improvement. A subgroup was set up chaired by Andrew Webb, Deputy Chair of the Task Force and Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council.

In order to gather as much feedback as possible to inform these recommendations, the sub-group have met with front-line practitioners, the 10 software suppliers, taken documentary evidence from Local Authorities (LAs), conducted an on-line survey of over 500 users and made ICS a specific discussion topic at each of the regional events in April.

This paper summarises that evidence and looks at what social workers want and need from ICS; what they have now; what can be done to help them immediately; and what needs to be done in the longer term to support them.

What is ICS and why do we have it?

In all the hundreds of pieces of feedback, it has become very clear to us that there is considerable confusion amongst front-line practitioners and managers about what ICS is, and importantly, what it is not. To be clear, the Social Work Task Force is not responsible for ICS. This section is included for information for people who are not familiar with ICS, and to set the context for the recommendations that we are making for improvements.

The ICS is not itself a computer system but a set of requirements for capturing and managing information necessary to work with children in need and their families. ICS has been developed, first by DH and then by DCSF, over several years in response to the findings of inspections, research and inquiries. These findings have demonstrated the need for conceptual systemisation in working with children in need.

The DCSF's stated aims for ICS are:

All practitioners and managers, responsible for children in need, should work in accordance with the ICS conceptual framework, from case referral to case closure;

Assessments of children in need should be completed with the necessary detail and within the required timescales;

Case-based information should be aggregated through computer systems into

management information, required for day-to-day service planning; and

All practitioners should feel they are supported in their work by working directly with ICT systems that support ICS.

There are three parts to the DCSF's ICS requirements:

1. Conceptual Framework - a framework for assessment, planning, intervention and reviewing;
2. Data requirements – the data required to plan and deliver services; and
3. Exemplars – these demonstrate how information outputs from the IT systems should be structured.

LAs have used the requirements to develop or commission local ICS-compliant systems. Approximately 95% of LAs have bought in systems from external software suppliers. There are currently 10 suppliers providing ICS-compliant systems.

Does ICS, as it is currently configured, support social workers?

Social workers want and need tools which support and enable them to do the best possible for children, young people and their families. They recognise that good quality record keeping is important in performing that role, but good quality record keeping alone is not sufficient for them to do their jobs well. Practitioners also need tools which support good quality assessment and analysis. They also recognise that good IT systems, with the proper training, infrastructure and local leadership commitment, can support and enable good practice.

But the great majority of front-line social workers feel that ICS, as they currently experience it, does not support them well. They feel frustrated and sometimes angry about a framework and computer system that they see as bureaucratic and which can act as a barrier to good practice rather than supporting it.

The most quoted issues are in relation to the use of exemplars and forms. These are seen as forcing a model of practice that social workers don't recognise in their day-to-day work. Indeed, many feel that the exemplars and forms constrain their ability to use their experience and professional judgement by making them 'tick boxes' and input irrelevant information.

Many managers feel that ICS is helpful in ensuring compliance and for monitoring statutory Performance Indicators. However, many practitioners, and their first line managers, feel that ICS does not support them in their work because they are being used only for compliance monitoring and not for analysis or assessing quality of practice. They also feel that the forced timing of performance indicators, can create perverse incentives to make hasty and risky decisions, and can lead to poor quality assessments.

Many practitioners and team managers are frustrated with the amount of time it takes to input data into some of the systems. Issues include having to repeat the same data entry, not enough access to computers and systems crashing causing lost data.

The other major concern raised by practitioners is that forms and subsequent outputs are often poorly formatted and not understandable by service users or other professionals working with them. This is related to the practice model itself, the design of the forms and the inflexibility in the outputs from some of the systems. There are also significant issues in the way systems handle disabled children and their families.

Practically everyone we talked to sees the need for electronic record keeping in the modern world. People don't want to go back to paper systems, but they do want and need the IT systems they have to work properly and to provide the 'readability' afforded by paper records, alongside the accessibility delivered by electronic formats. We did receive a number of positive comments and there are examples of good implementations where practitioners feel ICS supports their work. However, these were the exception rather than the rule, and that needs to change.

The main problems can be categorised into three main areas.

- Local Implementation – There is huge variation in the quality of ICS systems at the local level. This is due to factors such as local corporate IT infrastructure, speed and reliability of hardware, senior management commitment and implementation planning, the specification of the systems themselves and the quality of the support from the suppliers;
- The procurement model adopted by Government – Having Local Authorities (LAs) specify and procure their own systems has increased that local variation, along with the associated risks and issues; and
- Government ambitions for ICS – The assessment framework and the use of exemplars and forms mandate a model of practice that many practitioners do not recognise as helpful to their work and which can get in the way of a thoroughgoing analysis of the family's and of individual children's needs. Whatever the model of practice, an IT system is not the right way to enforce it.

Problems from all three categories are very often confused and conflated. This means that the aspirations of ICS are not recognised, nor the return on the significant investment made realised.

For all the reasons listed above, social workers need some immediate actions taken to improve their day-to-day working experience.

What can be done immediately with ICS to support social workers?

Some social workers say that ICS should simply be scrapped immediately, however we do not believe that is the right course of action. If we did not have ICS, alternative electronic record keeping systems would need to be created and implemented. This would cause significant additional work, disruption and uncertainty across children's social services. We know that short term actions have to be taken to ease pressures, however, we also need to think clearly about the future solution so that we get it right. Whatever is done now therefore cannot be allowed to hinder or prejudice that future outcome.

There are a number of key actions that can be taken by the DCSF, LAs and suppliers immediately to improve the working lives of social workers in relation to ICS:

Simplify the requirements – DCSF should relax the ICS specification compliance criteria to allow LAs and their suppliers to revise or remove forms and exemplars from local systems. This does not affect LA's responsibility for compliance with the statutory minimum standards on record keeping, however they should have more flexibility in how they achieve that compliance. There is likely to be variability amongst suppliers in their ability to respond to this, but our view is that suppliers who cannot adapt their systems are not well placed to respond to any subsequent legislative changes.

Remove Phase 1C deadline – DCSF should remove the deadline for all LAs to have implemented Phase 1C by October this year. LAs who are in a position to implement Phase 1C should be encouraged to continue as there are important upgrades relating to court reports, fostering and adoption, including fixes to some of the output problems. However those LAs still experiencing problems with their Phase 1 and Phase 1B systems should be allowed to work with suppliers to concentrate on fixing existing issues;

Supplier Product Usability - DCSF should carry out an immediate and rapid Usability Review of each ICS system, along with the LA infrastructure and implementation issues related to that system. It should focus on identifying what LAs have done to enhance practice in their area, in particular it should highlight where the adaptation or removal of exemplars or forms has relieved working pressures. These should be published as soon as possible so that LAs and social workers can make immediate improvements. It will also enable them to share best practice and get value for money from suppliers, especially where LAs have had different implementation experiences;

Ensure local accountability – Each LA should ensure that a named senior manager is accountable for driving improvements in ICS in each LA. The accountable officer needs to ensure that the implementation is 'practice led', not 'IT led'. This will entail them consulting with team managers and social workers using the system. DCSF also need to be clear about their responsibilities in relation to ICS;

Provide procurement support – DCSF should provide procurement support to LAs to ensure that they are getting value for money and improve the quality of service they get from their suppliers;

Funding - DCSF needs to be clear on the funding available to LAs in this financial year so that they can get on with planning and implementation of upgrades to systems and hardware.

What can we do in the longer term with ICS to support social workers?

Social workers need more than just a functioning IT system. They need clarity of role, better training, more support and improvements in all the areas that the Task Force is looking at developing into a long term programme of reform. ICS therefore needs to take that into account, including the recommendations the Task Force will be making in October. The work of the Task Force on caseload/workload expectations and team working will also have an impact on any recommendations about the nature and role of IT in support of practice, reinforcing our view that this element of the Task Force workplan cannot be seen in isolation. But work should begin now by DCSF to conduct a fundamental policy review of the aims of ICS, the conceptual framework, data requirements and exemplars. This needs to take into account the views of front line practitioners and the wider work of the Task Force. The principal aim of ICS should be to support high quality front-line practice. As it is regularly reviewed in the future, it should be judged against this aim before all else.

In Lord Laming's report he recommended that the DCSF *"undertake a feasibility study with a view to rolling out a single national Integrated Children's System better able to address the concerns identified in this report, or to find alternative ways to assert stronger leadership over the local systems and their providers"*. We agree with Lord Laming, and believe that the short term actions we are recommending will start to assert the stronger leadership he calls for.

However, there is more to be done in order for the Task Force to set out its vision for the future of IT systems to support social workers. We believe that a feasibility study into a national system would not be helpful as it would cause planning and implementation blight at the local level, and it is likely that suppliers would stop developing and improving their systems. Perhaps more importantly, we believe that a national feasibility study is not required as the overwhelming feedback has been that ICS systems should be locally owned and locally led, within a simplified national framework.

We do however believe there should be a national study, led by DCSF, into the issues relating to interoperability of ICS with ContactPoint, the national eCAF, locally developed eCAFs, other local systems and links to Health and other professions. All these issues are causing significant concern in LAs and on the front line and need to be addressed quickly. This study should be completed by the end of July in order to feed into our wider work on the long term future of IT systems required to support good Social Work practice. We will set out that vision, and long term recommendations, when we produce our final report in October.